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The Story and the Stitch.

Alice Kettle

This paper explores my work and the connection between stories and stitching. It seeks to find meaningfulness and purpose in these narratives and activities and see how they are a reflection of everyday encounters. It asks if there are mnemonic properties to stitching and stories that can offer ways to understand and transform actual experience and to represent the past by making it physical and continuous. Tim Ingold uses this textile vocabulary to present its close connection with story telling;

“To tell a story then, is to relate, in narrative the occurrences of the past, retracing a path through the world that others, recursively picking up the threads of past lives, can follow in the process of spinning their own. But rather as a looping or knitting, the thread being spun now and the thread being picked up from the past are both of the same yarn. There is no point at which the story ends.”¹

I shall start with stories and with a poem by Carol Ann Duffy titled ‘Little Red Cap’. The poem is based on the familiar traditional tale of Little Red Riding Hood. The many original versions recount similar events where she visits her grandmother in the woods. Grandmother has been eaten by the Wolf, who in disguise as Grandmother then proceeds to eat her. Duffy’s version retains the brutality and menace of the previous accounts but concerns sexual awakening, loss of innocence, misconception and power that is taken away and then re-appropriated back by Red Cap. Its pulsing, rhythmic pentameter and rhyme give a noisiness to this transition into womanhood. It is sensual, colourful, autobiographical and violent. Moving through love to venom it finishes;

...Words, words were truly alive on the tongue, in the head,
warm, beating, frantic, winged; music and blood.

I took an axe
To a willow to see how it wept. I took an axe to a salmon
To see how it leapt. I took an axe to a wolf
As he slept, one chop, scrotum to throat and saw
The glistening white of grandmother’s bones
I filled his old belly with stones. I stitched him up
Out of the forest I come with my flowers singing all alone.²

Red Cap crosses from puzzlement of her power, to realization of her powerlessness, to stitching up the wolf’s stomach full of stones. The wolf will never get up. This framing of mythology and folk history as hybrid autobiographical retellings, has an equivalency in my own work, where stories and stitch piece together new tellings. Using the sewing machine, stitching offers a way to gain power from puzzlement much like Red Cap. The stitched stories are less noisy than Duffy’s,

¹ Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (London: Routledge, 2007), 90.

² Carol Ann Duffy, *The World's Wife* (London: Picador, 1999), 3-5.

they are muted and oblique narrations, but share a desire to untangle hierarchies and explore ways in which women are within stories. My language is also rhythmic, patterned and alliterative, but words have become stitches. Embroidery presents a site to generate transformative counter narratives, in the way Marina Warner describes, adopting stories as an alternative “picture-language ... fluid and shapeshifting”.³ These stories with stitch are a way of being an active participant in reconfiguring a narrative line.

Like many who have been brought up to be in the background of others lives and to be compliant, it is more possible to deal with conflict in material and through making as a telling, where the stones can be stitched back in. So I will start with stories and then come to thread, subject and material are tied intimately together, intermingled in each other but easier to separate now and twist them back together.

The novelist A.S. Byatt speaks of the tale as providing her impulse to write which came, “from years of reading myths and fairytales under the bedclothes, from the delights, freedoms and terrors of worlds and creatures that never existed”.⁴ Fairytales act as prototypes for action and imagination. They are populated by enchanted creatures, driven by love and fueled by extraordinary and violent events. Stories allow us to examine the truth of who we are, the desires within us, to wield the axe and reconstruct the wolf skin of our relationships and encounters. Stories offer transformational possibilities and places to resolve discord, deal with abuse, and obliteration. Future orientated and optimistic, they are impermanent in time and space. Lutz Rohrich, writing on the traditional story, describes them as “paradigmatic examples of conflicts in decisive life situations”⁵ and open to continual modernization through our own interpretation. My own work visualizes emancipation within a storied vision, these stories signpost an equivalent reality where one can imagine possibilities of change. The storied setting allows a more comfortable way to examine the truth of who we are, the desires within us and the relationships we have. They allow structures to be taken apart and reconfigured as impossible but functioning entities. Bruno Bettelheim sees the story like an anchor that allows transformational, abstract thinking with “life divined from the inside”.⁶ Both stories and art are a way of accessing another space, one that lies between imagination and reality –I would argue, a space to encounter a kind of magical change. Maria Tamboukou calls them the storyworlds we emerge from, which as Bettelheim says, anchor us, yet act as a vector of force which throws us into the future. These stories are Marina’s places of transgression and “thought experiments”, ways that we can fix experience to the world and leap under and over it.⁷ Duffy’s Red Cap moves through powerlessness to power, through the forest to the bed, grasped by and grasping the world and making it different.

³ Maria Warner, 2016, *How Fairytales Grew Up*, accessed January 29, 2017, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/dec/12/how-fairytales-grew-up-frozen>.

⁴ Areti Dragas, *The Return of the Storyteller in Contemporary Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 231.

⁵ Lutz Rohrich, “Introduction,” in *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion and Paradigm*, ed. Ruth Bottigheimer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 1.

⁶ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010 [1976]).

⁷ Maria Warner, 2014. *On Magic*, accessed August 20, 2015, http://www.threepennyreview.com/samples/warner_sp14.html.

In my thread experiments, the anchor is stitch, with its traditions and associated histories. The vector that Tamboukou describes can be seen as the line of thread; a creative material filament. As a metaphorical trajectory it pulls away from its fixing to stretch, reach and strain elsewhere whilst still retaining its fixing and hold to the ground. This is what Anni Albers describes as the metaphorical character of thread, which makes visible “what had been brewing in our consciousness or sub-consciousness, in our awareness or in our dreams”.⁸ Thread and stitch have a particular narrative voice that can be appropriated for the needs of concealed meaning, and serve to clarify the movement between metaphor and realisation that is essential to artistic creation. Stitching as a process is often immersive, even obsessive, and repetitive. Frances Morris in relation to the work of Louise Bourgeois describes the use of “association-laden materials and process-orientated techniques” to underline a contingency of stitch, cloth and her artistic vision. Through her textile works she affects psychological repair.⁹ This active process of transformation of material, self and being in the world, shaped by thread and stitching, in Bourgeois’ case is emancipatory, hopeful and recuperative.

Ann Macbeth, who taught embroidery from c1911 at the Glasgow School of Art, describes the liberating capacity of needlework to permit curiosity to play freely.¹⁰ The process of stitching requires intense attentiveness. Colette is made anxious by her daughter Bel Gazou’s still concentration, “Eyes lowered, head bent, shoulders hunched – the position signifies repression and subjugation, yet the embroiderers silence... suggests a containment, a kind of autonomy”.¹¹ Stitching is a powerful gesture to enact a “subversive personal vision in acceptable decorative terms”¹² and as Rozika Parker refers to embroidery it emerges from ‘within the arteries to provide the grounding medium of invention’.¹³

The symbiotic relationship of storytelling and cloth is referred to by Kathryn Sullivan Kruger in *The Fabric of Myth*, as “the mysterious power of fabric” which reproduces symbols and beliefs while acting as a metaphor “for the creation of something other than a cloth – a story, a plot, a world”.¹⁴ My work is within the histories of those who use the medium of needle and thread to integrate mythology/traditional stories and personal experience – especially treatments which are cyclical and recurrent. Such renderings draw together the rhythmic gestures of stitch and the generative/regenerative capacity of experience as a ‘self-remembering’ to connect the past with

⁸Anni Albers, 1982, “Material as Metaphor,” in *The Art/Craft Connection: Grass Roots or Glass Houses* at the College Art Association’s 1982 annual meeting, February 25, 1982, accessed January 29, 2017, <http://www.albersfoundation.org/artists/selected-writings/anni-albers/#tab4>.

⁹ Frances Morris, *Louise Bourgeois; Stitches in Time* (London: August Projects, 2003), 13.

¹⁰ Ann Macbeth & Margaret Swanson, *Educational Needlework* (London: Longmans Green and Co, 1913).

¹¹ Rozika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 10.

¹² Greer cited in Maria Manuel Lisboa, *Paula Rego’s Map and Memory: National and Sexual Politics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 3. The tapestry work of the Norwegian artist Hannah Ryggen (1894–1970) was influenced by political and social struggle. Steffen Wesselvold Holden describes how her work sits outside the art historical canon since textiles was viewed a merely a decorative medium.

¹³ Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 211.

¹⁴ Katherine Sullivan Kruger, “Clues and Cloth: Seeking Ourselves,” in *The Fabric of Myth*, ed. Antonia Harrison and James Young (Warwickshire: Compton Verney, 2008), 10.

the present.¹⁵ Using allegory as a construct, which freezes time, a lived mythology of experience merges personal memory and collective remembering. This connectedness and fusing of successive past and present experience becomes a constant recycling of time as generative, rhythmic and repeated and enacted through stitching. Using the sewing machine in my work there are two independent threads which connect as stitches through the balancing of the tensions of the machine. It is only possible to glimpse the totality of the work during the making, especially since much is made on the reverse side bundled up in the machine, only becoming complete within the mind's eye. The hidden (the reverse side of the work) generates the seen. The crucial importance is provided by the invisible underside, and the relation between seen and sensed reality, as mirror to each other, a place of transformative possibility, and of thought and thread experiments.

Alice Kyteler is a real story. I made a portrait of her to examine power and powerlessness. The real-life condemned medieval witch Alice Kyteler was depicted as an alter ego, a fellow being who, through stitch, might reclaim her own powerful autonomy. Through portraying myself, I portrayed my double, as a divided self with doubts and torments in a combative environment. My name, Alice Kettle, is a rendering in English of the Gaelic Alice Kyteler, thus on one level a blending of personal histories occurs with the simple acknowledgement of my namesake. The work uses witchcraft as a process of transmutation, and stitch as a force able to effect similar alchemical types of material and personal transformation.

The medieval Alice Kyteler was born in 1280 at Kyteler's House, a site close to the National Craft Gallery in Kilkenny, Ireland where the exhibition opened on Hallowe'en. A wealthy Anglo-Norman noblewoman, Kyteler married four times, acquiring influence and status. In 1324 she was accused of witchcraft and her trial was amongst the first when Pope John XXII listed witchcraft as a heresy in *Super illius specula*.¹⁶ Kyteler's indictment was seen as stemming from "confrontation between secular and ecclesiastical authority".¹⁷ She was faced with seven charges amongst which are sleeping with an incubus, and invoking a demon by cutting up and scattering animal parts. Kyteler's increasing status was causal in her condemnation. Ultimately, Kyteler was condemned to execution by burning... a fate from which she escaped.¹⁸ Kyteler's cutting became my cropping of fabric as a transformative action of magical power. In becoming my namesake through her depiction, I took on the guise of a witch, clothing myself in garments of magical protection embroidered with spells and charms and becoming my animal self. Diane Purkiss' evaluation of the feminist rewritings of the 1970s is valuable for showing how the witch was remodelled as a woman of beauty and power.¹⁹

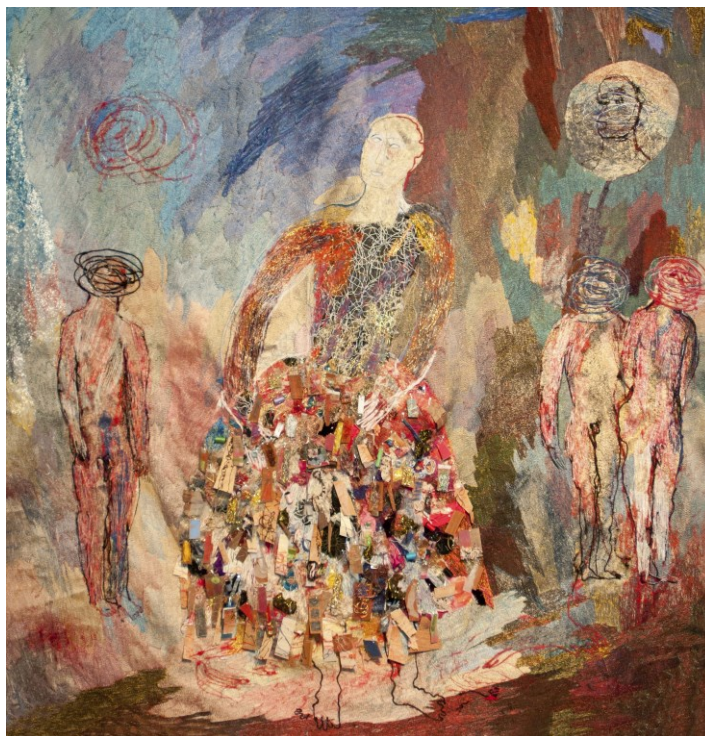
¹⁵ Ralph Metzner, "Ten Classical Metaphors of Self-Transformation," *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 12(1) (1980): 53.

¹⁶ Pope John XXII listed witchcraft as a heresy in *Super illius specula*. Kyteler's was one of the first European witchcraft trials and followed closely on the election of this pope (1316–1334). Wikipedia entry about Alice Kyteler, accessed July 20, 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alice_Kyteler.

¹⁷ Bernadette Williams, *The Sorcery Trial of Alice Kyteler. Features*, 2(4) Winter 1994, *Medieval History* (pre-1500)

¹⁸ However, her servant girl was burned in her place.

¹⁹ Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representation* (London: Routledge, 1996), 13.



Alice Kettle
Alice Kyteler
2010
172 x 182 cm
Thread, found objects, wood on canvas
Photo: Rebecca Peters

Alice Kyteler subverts the assumptions around the disparaging of women expressed by the patriarchal pejorative ‘witch’. She wears a dress made of embroidered tags, brushes and small objects attached to her skirt, “the fictional magic of talismanic garments as magical instruments”.²⁰ In the background are the husbands, who as Emperors wearing their ‘new clothes’ are made foolish by the intensity of their self-belief.²¹

Warner describes magical corsets with wishes stitched into them and Ottoman princes whose cloaks could conjure them elsewhere.²² However, this *Alice Kyteler* hides in the symbolic garments of an English Tudor portrait, modeled on portraits of the Virgin Queen, strong and singular. The portraits of the British Elizabeth I, such as the Ditchling portrait (1592)²³ in which she wears decorative robes loaded with iconographic motifs: from representations of power such as globes and swords, to representations of purity such as moons and pearls. The *Alice Kyteler* gown has golden embroidered charms, devotional medals that allude to the magic induced by

²⁰ Warner, “On Magic.”

²¹ Christian H. Andersen, “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” in Hans *Andersen’s Fairy Tales* trans. LW Kingsland Oxford, Oxford World Classics (2009[1959]), 107-114.

²² Warner, “On Magic.”

²³ *Queen Elizabeth I* (‘The Ditchling portrait’) by Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger c 1592. The National Portrait Gallery, accessed July 20, 2015, <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw02079/Queen-Elizabeth-I-The-Ditchley-portrait>.

stitching. In Warner's description this is "the prophetic ability to imagine what has not yet come to be", stitch is used to create a validating self-image of the transgressive self.²⁴

Golden Dawn, a further work, reimagines the moment of expulsion of the neo-fascist Golden Dawn party from the Greek government in 2013. From 2003, the party built its reputation on its anti-immigration response to growing pressures on the economy; its leader Nikolaos Michaloliakos and other members were arrested in 2013 following the murder of the anti-fascist rapper Pavlos Fyssas. Michaloliakos was the promoter of exclusionist policies. Violently triumphant, this provokes ripples of thought on the nature of cultural identity, social and destructive force. The myth of Ariadne and her golden thread layer an autobiographical meaning beneath the political, and draws upon the symbolic and indexical element of gold thread.

By using stitch, I sought to re-enter what had occurred as insider and outsider, as active Ariadne. This is not "the world as it is, it does not describe the outer world, but the inner processes taking place in the individual" as a participant, an impotent observer.²⁵

Gold, and gold thread with its magical usefulness and apotropaic qualities, conjures a personal dawn of new beginnings where thread is the starting point of change.²⁶ Ariadne cannot be seen in figural form; she is implicated in the action through her embodiment in golden thread signifying both her power to rescue and powerlessness in abandonment. She is knotted into the intricacies of daughter/lover/interrogator of familial, marital and partisan relations with golden thread symbolic of unraveling and tension. This tensile filament tugs at my own Greekness. Theseus escaping the labyrinth through Ariadne's gift of thread offers rich metaphorical resonance. The thread is a means to wayfare into the world as well as to re-trace journeys. Tim Ingold's wayfarer advances and meanders towards future paths and new topologies.²⁷ Kathryn Sullivan Kruger describes this thread as a metaphor for a thought which leads into another world and "unfolds and ... returns [us] ... to the world of light and possibility, forever transformed".²⁸ Thread is viewed by anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss as the dialectic movement between inner and outer pictorial zones operating as path of entry and withdrawal.²⁹ This path mediates where art extends into the world and where myth and experience become enmeshed. Thread in this stitch work is an Ariadnean line of passage which entering the fabric, meets its counterpoint, twists and pulls back to the other side.

²⁴ Maria Warner, *Stranger Magic; Charmed States and the Arabian Nights* (London, Vintage, 2012), 433.

²⁵ Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 25.

²⁶ Accessed July 23, 2015, <https://finds.org.uk/staffshoardsymposium/papers/charlottebehr>.

²⁷ Tim Ingold, *Being Alive* (London: Routledge, 2011), 150.

²⁸ Sullivan Kruger, "Clues and Cloth," 14.

²⁹ Claude Levi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (New York: Stocken Books, 1979).

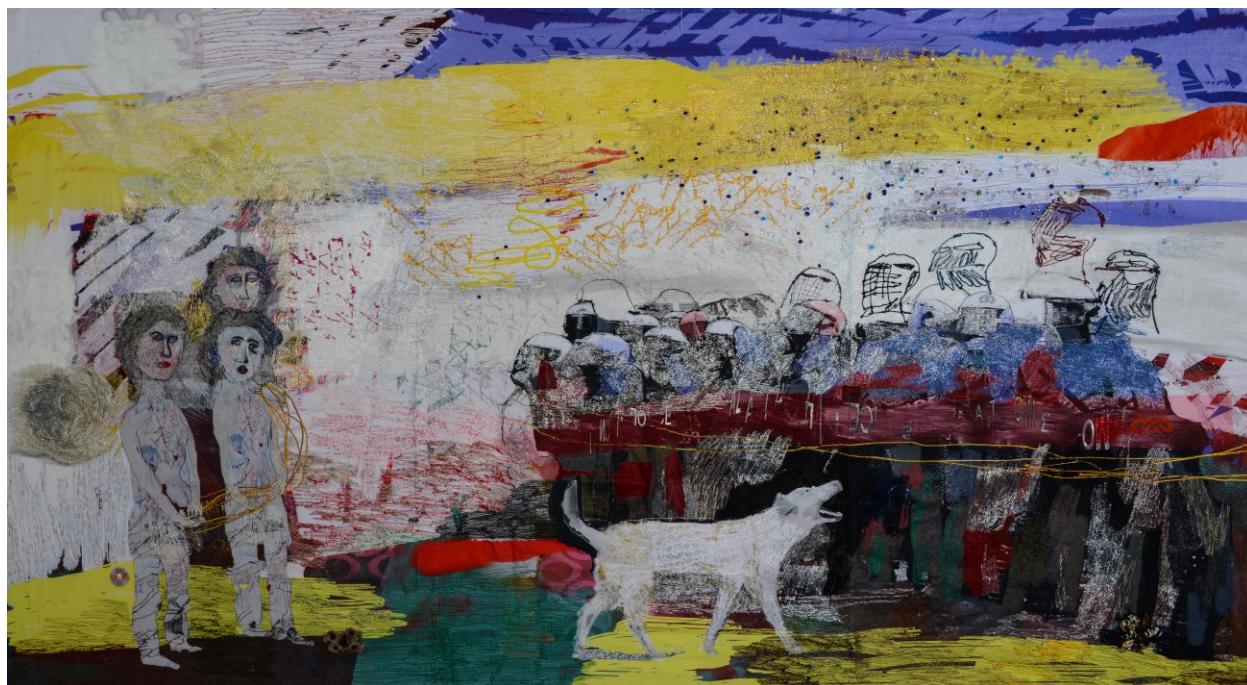


Alice Kettle
Golden Dawn 2014
350 x 162 cm
Thread and print on canvas
Photo: Joe Low
Collection: Shipley Museum and Art Gallery.

The linked work, titled *The Dog Loukanikos and the Cat's Cradle*, depicts three women playing cat's cradle with a golden thread. They stand behind the dog Loukanikos who barks at a group of riot police who are constrained by another golden thread. "Like the dog of Hades, Loukanikos mediates politics and magic, reproduction and territorialisation, dream and disillusionment."³⁰ Loukanikos, an actual dog, became a symbol of protest; a stray dog who stood at the front of protesters during the Greek austerity protests and election campaigns of 2014–15. Defender and barking beast, he is center stage with the trio of women (maybe the three allegorical Fates, maybe myself and two sisters or my three daughters). The women are umbilically linked by golden thread as they play the traditional string game of cat's cradle. Donna Haraway has made much use of the cat's cradle as a metaphor for knowledge making and the messiness of mortal entanglements with the pastness of the present continually converging with the future, collapsing and reinventing each other.³¹ Picking up this theme, thread is active, activated through use, reconfiguring patterns and structures as it becomes entangled. String (or for my purposes thread) in the cat's cradle figure games, become the thread experiments, tied to a tradition, passed on and reinvented.

³⁰ Amanda Ravetz, "Enchanted Times, the Textile Work of Alice Kettle," in *Vas:t 2015 Visual Arts Scotland: Transforming*, ed. Robbie Bushe (Edinburgh: VAS, 2015), 43.

³¹ Donna Haraway, "A Game of Cat's Cradle: Science Studies, Feminist Theory," *Cultural Studies*. 'Configurations' 2(1) (1994): 59–71. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/con.1994.0009.



Alice Kettle
The Dog Loukanikos and the Cat's Cradle 2015
520 x 217 cm
Thread and print on canvas
Photo: Joe Low

In one of the sub-narratives of the work, a white bird, roughly stitched by a child sits on the helmet of a police officer in a surge of symbolism is like the white dove of peace, or the urban pigeon on the public statues of the noble.

Golden Dawn and *Loukanikos* suggest a continual tension between cynicism and change. In recognising the potency of Ariadne's thread, these works respond to the posturing of politics as they tie in the recurring patterns of myth, actual event and autobiography as entanglements of each other. Contemporary events present us with a troubling challenge of tensions and fragmentation in what appear to be a collapsing alliances and isolationism in both politics and society. Stitching the stones back inside the belly of the wolf, finding a threadlike charm or navigable passage, offer ways to advance one kind of change, through looking through experimenting with entanglements, opening up passages and alternative versions of being knowing they can be re-stitched and joined back in a new way.

Luce Irigaray refers to a mirror as a way of seeing. She describes this mirror as a concave form which has no symmetry in the reflected image but in the curve of its interior space there is accentuated light and alternative views of this image. This way of seeing as the other side of what is visible acts as a metaphor for insight into self-knowledge (she talks of being female). It is also a way of sensing and reflecting back on the world, through a deeper appreciation of the inner self: "what could be understood is the brilliance of the soul-mirror – *la pschye*".³² The

³² Hilary Robinson, *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray, the Politics of Art by Women* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 74.

entry of light into Irigaray's concave mirror is dazzling and blinding, allowing the



Alice Kettle
The Dog Loukanikos and the Cat's Cradle 2015
520 x 217 cm
Thread and print on canvas
Photo: Joe Low

appreciation of a different acute reflected view. In the medieval tapestry series, *The Lady and the Unicorn* at the Cluny Museum in Paris, the allegory of sight depicts the unicorn gazing into the mirror of Truth that can be seen by the beholder, but not by the figure of Contemplation (the lady) holding the mirror.³³ Her eyes are inclined towards the unicorn, but her vision is directed inward through the mind's eye, suggesting a between state. This complex allegory helps to describe the position of the artist during the process of creation: actively engaged in both worlds, mediating between thought and vision, constructing the reflection of an image known before it is seen. In seeking meaning and meaningfulness through stitch, a process of transformation can be affected by thread. The creative experiments of stitch undertake this active encounter, they become a narrative voice to tell and retell the cycle of events that are real and imagined, as part of what might happen. The two independent threads act as the images of each other. Stitch is a way to constantly tell stories through making and remaking: 'I Do, I Undo, I Redo'.³⁴

³³ Michel Serres writes about these tapestries, citing the sixth tapestry which portrays the sixth sense that is where the self can discover the self. M. Serres, *The Five Senses [Les Cinq Sens]: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies (Athlone Contemporary European Thinkers)*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2008 [1985]).

³⁴ Louise Bourgeois, "I Do, I Undo, I Redo 2000," Unilever Series at Tate Modern installation and title of exhibition, accessed October 5, 2015, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-louise-bourgeois-i-do-i-undo-i-redo>.

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